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AUTHOR Scott, Elva R.
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ABSTRACT

The 80-year history of education at Eagle on the Yukon (Alaska) includes 40 years when a dual system (white-Indian) was in operation, times when only one school was open, and changes following statehood. Eagle City was founded in 1898; the first white school opened in 1901 with seven students. The Indians lived at Eagle Village, 3 miles upriver. After the Episcopal Church sent a teacher to Eagle Village in 1905, the Bureau of Education sent a teacher in 1909 and the federal government remained responsible for that school until 1967. Sometimes the Eagle City school was closed because of insufficient enrollment and sometimes the Eagle Village school was closed for lack of funds; there are no records indicating that one group used the other's school during these periods. Statehood brought some attention to local school districts and in 1967 Eagle became a part of the rural-oriented Division of State Operated Schools, the new Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Eagle Village was transferred to the state, and Eagle's dual school system ended. Secondary education continues to be a problem for Eagle, and for Alaska. A high school was begun in 1976, but many Eagle area students prefer correspondence study. (BRR)

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ALASKA EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN ACTION AT EAGLE, ALASKA

1901 - 1981

Summary of 'Eagle's Schools Eighty Years' presented to Alaska Historical Society Educational Conference October 1982 at Valdez by Elva R. Scott

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ALASKA EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN ACTION AT EAGLE, ALASKA

1901 - 1981

Elva R. Scott

Eagle on the Yukon has a most interesting rural school history, especially when viewed within the context of the Alaska School History. For over forty years two separate schools were maintained in Eagle and administered by a variety of systems. Fortunately, not only the school buildings remain, but the school records have been kept intact over those years and relate many educational, social and economic events of both communities.

Historically, all was quiet in the Eagle area until the gold miners started flocking north in the late 1890's. In 1897 the federal government received reports of miners starving on the Upper Yukon and directed Captain Ray and Lt. Richardson to proceed to the area and report on the conditions. After their investigation, Ray and Richardson recommended that an army post be

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Elva R. Scott is the secretary/treasurer of the Eagle Historical Society, volunteer curator for the Eagle Museum, volunteer librarian for the Eagle Public Library and Historian for the Alaska Nurses' Association. Mrs. Scott earned her BS degree in nursing at the University of California in 1941 and was awarded an M Ed degree at the University of Alaska in 1965. She has lived in Alaska since 1946 and has been involved in professional nursing and community organizations in Homer, Fairbanks, Anchorage and for the past 11 years Eagle City. Mrs. Scott is presently working on a Health History of the Eagle area, having completed the School History in 1981, is a researcher for an Alaska Nurses Historical Project and edited two volumes of a compilation of Eagle Historical Papers in 1978. She has published numerous professional papers as well as historical and biographical articles.

established near the boundary of Alaska and Canada, selecting a site by Mission Creek. Hearing of this, some discontented American Klondike gold miners established Eagle City in May 1898 on the site, and laid out lots to sell which attracted gold miners from the Dawson area. Businesses were soon booming. a Chamber of Commerce organized and a municipal government formed. In June, a company of infantry soldiers arrived to begin the building of Fort Egbert adjacent to the new city.

In June 1900, Eagle City was chosen as the headquarters for the newly formed Third Judicial District Court. Judge Wickersham and members of his court arrived, bringing their families including children with them. The influence of these persons must have accelerated the 86 petition signers to apply for City Incorporation in November 1900 and vote on it January 1901. During this election, the 33 voters elected city council members as well as school board members. The school board members carried out their charge by hiring a local teacher for $100 a month, purchasing a few books and supplies and opening the first school in September 1901 with seven white students in a rented building.

The Civil Code Act of 1900 not only established the court in Eagle, but also created taxation through trade and business licenses. Fifty percent of the monies collected by the Federal Government for licenses within the municipality, was to be used for financing schools within these municipalities. In 1901 there were surplus funds with which to build a new school on the 40 acre school reserve. The second year, the school opened in the new building with the enrollment leveling out at 10 - 12 white students from Eagle City and Fort Egbert. There were no federal regulations or standards, truly

an independent school district. In spite of the remote location, difficult travel and limited accomodations, there appears to have been few problems in recruiting teachers from the Northwest, usually Oregon who remained in Eagle City for two years.

EAGLE VILLAGE

During this early period, Dr. Sheldon Jackson had been appointed Director of the Bureau of Education with the responsibility of establishing schools for Alaskan children with very limited funds. He had anticipated that the municipal schools being organized, would include native students, but this was not the case. The Indians living at Eagle Village, three miles up river from Eagle City, had no school in the village nor did their children attend school in the city. In these days the churches filled many of the educational, medical and welfare needs of the Alaska residents. Bishop Rowe of the Episcopal Church noted the lack of educational opportunities at the village and sent Mr. Boulter, a lay reader and teacher to Eagle Village in 1905. He held school in the village chapel for four years where all ages attended together, infants through adults. His main emphasis was on teaching English, Christian education and music. The villagers still remember this as a happy time in spite of much physical misery; tuberculosis was rampant in their village and other deadly epidemics continued to sweep through the village causing much havoc. By working with Dr. Jackson, monies were obtained and Mr. Boulter started building a log school at the village on property deeded to the government by the Episcopal Church. In 1909 the first Bureau of Education teacher was sent to Eagle Village and Mr. Boulter was promoted to

Superintendent of the Upper Yukon for the Bureau. Mr. Nichols had his hands full, starting school classes while finishing the school construction and is still remembered as Walter, the builder. Classes were established for school age and older pre-school children, adult classes in the evening, gardening all summer and he assisted with Sunday School and Church on Sundays and was on sick call 24 hours a day. The Bureau of Education teacher was the only non-Indian resident in the village and their responsibility was to educate the entire village with few supplies and fewer guidelines.

New teachers arrived at the village every year or two and their reports gave more attention to the medical conditions in the village than to educational progress. They all indicated a prevalence of tuberculosis, syphilis and scrofula which caused the draining neck abscesses on the children. One teacher reported, "Unless some means is found to stop the progress of this disease (tuberculosis), this village will be wiped out."

FORT EGBERT ABANDONED

Discovery of the wireless in 1908 made the Valdez-Eagle telegraph line obsolete and the services of the U. S. Army were no longer needed. Fort Egbert was abandoned in 1911, leaving only three Signal Corps men in Eagle. When the Infantry company and all the support personnel moved to Tanana, there were only two school age children left in the city and their school was closed from 1912-1916. The village teacher reported that the town of Eagle was but a relic of the past, and the Indians now had great difficulty in disposing of their meat and fancy work thus greatly reducing their income. The army doctor used to

assist the teacher with the medical care of the villagers and the army used to loan the village, horses and a plow to use in their gardens.

PROHIBITION

Prohibition in the United States has been blamed for many things. Prohibition in Alaska has at least one thing to its credit. It was responsible for the removal of many educational restrictions which had been placed on the Territorial Legislature, thus making it possible for that body to enact legislation establishing schools and appropriating money for their support. No small part of the funds derived by Alaska towns for the support of schools and general municipal expenses had come from saloon licenses. The cutting off of this revenue was bound to play havoc with both schools and municipal governments, which it did in Eagle City. The Alaska legislative body soon went into action and passed the Uniform School Act which provided that 75% of the cost of maintenance of schools in incorporated towns shall be paid from the Territorial treasury, the balance to be assumed by the incorporated towns.

So in 1917, Eagle City was back in the school business with adequate enrollment plus financial support. As permitted by the Uniform School Act, the Town of Eagle passed an ordinance to tax real property in the town for school and municipal purposes, thus city funds were available to cover the required 25% of the school operational costs. Along with the financial support, came the first supervision of the operation of the school. New roofing was put on the school, flag pole erected and school was again opened with eleven students and teachers remaining for one or two years. One teacher gave a clue to the short teachers tenure, when she wrote "One sort of petrifies in a place like this. It's just a trifle like Sleepy Hollow."

The economic condition of the natives was greatly affected by World War I. The prices for furs fell far below normal while the cost of food, clothing and manufactured imported articles increased 300%. The organized air routes in Alaska in the early 1930's provided some relief for the teachers, as did the radio service operated by the Army and Navy, but the teachers still remained the community leaders, arbitrator of disputes, censor of morals, preserver of peace, public nurse and medical advisor.

A single woman teacher, Ole Hansen, came to the village in 1925 and remained for thirteen years, leaving a deep impact on the village. She seemed to have the special ability to make a game out of required work and had their full interest and cooperation. She also set excellent examples. After leaving the teachers position, this teacher remained in Eagle City where the Indians always visited her and kept her informed about the village activities. She continued to help them in many ways. When there were problems in the village, she would quietly say, "Oh how I wish I could have taught them more."

In 1931 the transfer to the Office of Indian Service allowed all native American education programs to be channeled through a single agency. A new course of study was started, teachers qualifications were upgraded as well as their salary. In 1945 the Office of Indian Affairs stated their appropriation had been cut and abruptly closed the Eagle Village School though there was both adequate enrollment and facilities. It remained closed until 1953, which mean t the end of education for most of the students. For this reason there are adults at the village today whose education ended at the fourth grade or lower.

SEE/SAW OF DUAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS

In 1934 Eagle City began to have enrollment problems again. In trying to keep their enrollment up to six, it was necessary to find teachers with school age children to swell the enrollment numbers to the requirement. Teachers were replaced and Anne Hobbs Hansen of TISHA fame, returned with four of her adopted children and remained several years. In 1939 the Territorial legislature passed a new law making it compulsory for incorporated towns in the 4th Division to pay a yearly salary to the teachers of $2100.00. Eagle responded that it would be considerably embarrassed to meet this demand as the population was small and taxes hard to collect. They asked the teacher to again include the janitorial work in her salary. With the decrease in school age children and the increase in cost of school operation, the Eagle City school was closed for four years. More families arrived with school children and the school was operated from 1945 to 1955 in the city, when it closed its doors for the last time due to the lack of students.

During this see-saw period, of first the village school and then the city school being closed, there were no records to indicate that the population of one area used the school of the other area. One of the Indian families remembers making an effort to send their children to the Eagle City School which required them to have a clear health certificate, walk the three miles both ways and the missionary to provide their lunches. At best, their attendance was erratic and no record of their attendance was noted.

With the City population continuing to shrink, the Bureau of Indian Affairs could no longer shirk their responsibility for education and the school was reopened in Eagle Village in 1953 with 19 students. In 1964 the BIA built a

new school at the village with one large classroom, school kitchen and teachers residence. The money which the Indians earned while working on the school building created a major drinking problem within the village which meant the school children missed much school and when they did attend were inattentive due to hunger and fatigue. The teacher was instrumental in getting the City to withdraw the liquor license, making liquor only available via road or air.

STATEHOOD

Statehood for Alaska in 1958 had a significant influence on the structure of local school districts, but little on the development of programs for rural education. The state constitution required the legislature to establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the state. The two components of the dual system of rural education were still far apart and a satisfactory plan for merging them into a single system had not emerged.

In 1965 increased attention was given to rural education and the State Department of Education was reorganized. A Division of State Operated Schools was established of which Eagle became a part when the new BIA School in the Indian Village was transferred to the State of Alaska in 1967, thus ending Eagle's dual school system. It continued to be a one-room, one-teacher school for grades 1-8 with opportunities to continue with a secondary education by taking a correspondence program at home, or attend a state operated regional high school or a boarding home program in an urban community of their choice. The Native students could also attend BIA high schools in Oregon, Oklahoma or Alaska.

Secondary education for rural students was one of the concerns of the State operated schools and in 1966, they contracted for an in-depth study of the

subject. They found that the true problem was much broader than simply providing a good high school for all rural Alaskans. The fact of the matter was that many of the educational problems of rural Alaskan youth begin long before high school and may be beyond the capacity of even the best possible high school to remedy. As early as six or seven years, a child from a culturally disadvantaged environment may have acquired a sufficient handicap that he can never catch up to a child of comparable innate ability from a more advantaged environment. One socio-economic aspect of rural schools which cannot be ignored is that they tend to concentrate and anchor a population. The elementary school which exists have already concentrated rural people into small, economically nonviable villages where it is not possible in the foreseeable future for those persons to earn a living income. The permanence and size of the village, on the other hand, do not allow the village to exist solely by the traditional subsistence hunting and fishing methods. Consequently, many of these villages are forced to exist on a welfare economy, which in itself, tends to produce a "poverty culture." This in turn, produces a culturally disadvantaged environment which is not conducive to educational achievement. The study resulted in presenting five alternative secondary educational systems for rural Alaska giving their benefits, liabilities and cost, ranking them in order of the maximum benefit of each. Following this study, the SOS developed small and large regional high schools and urban boarding home programs.

While changes were being sought to improve the rural education, it was suddenly taken out of the educators hands and specific changes were mandated by law, mainly by the "Molly Hootch" decree. This lawsuit was filed in 1972 and settled out of court in 1976, called for construction of high schools in villages with eight or more high school age students, which ironically was the system

with the least educational benefits of all five systems studied. The village high school was not supported by many village students who felt that they would be denied opportunities enjoyed by their older brothers and sisters. Some native leaders and village teachers were highly skeptical of the educational potential of the village school concept at a time when highly trained Natives were badly needed.

REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL ATTENDANCE AREAS.

Due to pressure for more local control, the State Legislature abolished the SOS system in 1975 and set up a process for establishing 21 Regional Educational Attendance Areas which became school districts in 1977. Eagle became a part of the Gateway REAA, whose headquarters were located in Tok. Regional boards were elected for each REAA, to be aided by community advisory school committees. The decree became effective in Eagle in 1976 when two high school teachers were hired for 13 students in grades 8-10, holding school first in their private residence and later in the remodeled courthouse. The teacher described the year as a "winter of problems." During the summer, the original BIA school building was remodeled, making four classrooms and school opened with five certified teachers and a secretary for 37 students. Then the state building program hit Eagle and in 1979 the expensive multipurpose building was added to the school complex which has required major repairs annually. The average cost per student per year in the Gateway REAA was $4,231.00 in 1976 and $6,249.00 in 1979, three times the national average. During the years 1976 - 1981, an average of eleven students in the Eagle area have chosen to take correspondence study at home rather than attend the school.

What has been the success of the small village high school in Eagle where the enrollment is half native and half Caucasian? It did hold the marginal students, where regular attendance is not a major issue and the students are given much individual freedom. Social and emotional problems exist among the students; many similar to those described in the studies of the regional high schools. A psychologist was available to the school, but referrals were not made. Seniors graduated, but how can one judge the value of the diploma when the school caters to the student's interests and inclinations which are determined by his environment? Did it prepare the student to enter the main stream of American society? Of the 10 graduating seniors, none have made a successful transition to college or to regular employment outside of Eagle; two tried, but both returned. The academically inclined students at Eagle, have either moved to larger communities or have taken the correspondence program. The state wide study "Native College Success in the 70's" has also indicated a decline in the number of native earned degrees from UAF between 1976-1980.

The latest event in the Eagle school story, is that the State Representative has requested funding to build a new larger school building on a new site. From the educational standpoint, the school building is one of the least important factors in providing high quality instruction. The REAA's are 100% funded by the State of Alaska.

Due to time limitations, I have only been able to present the skeleton of Eagle' eighty year educational experience. For the meat I would refer you to the 387 page document entitled EAGLE SCHOOLS EIGHTY YEARS, prepared in 1981. Copies are available at the State Historical Library and the University of Alaska libraries.

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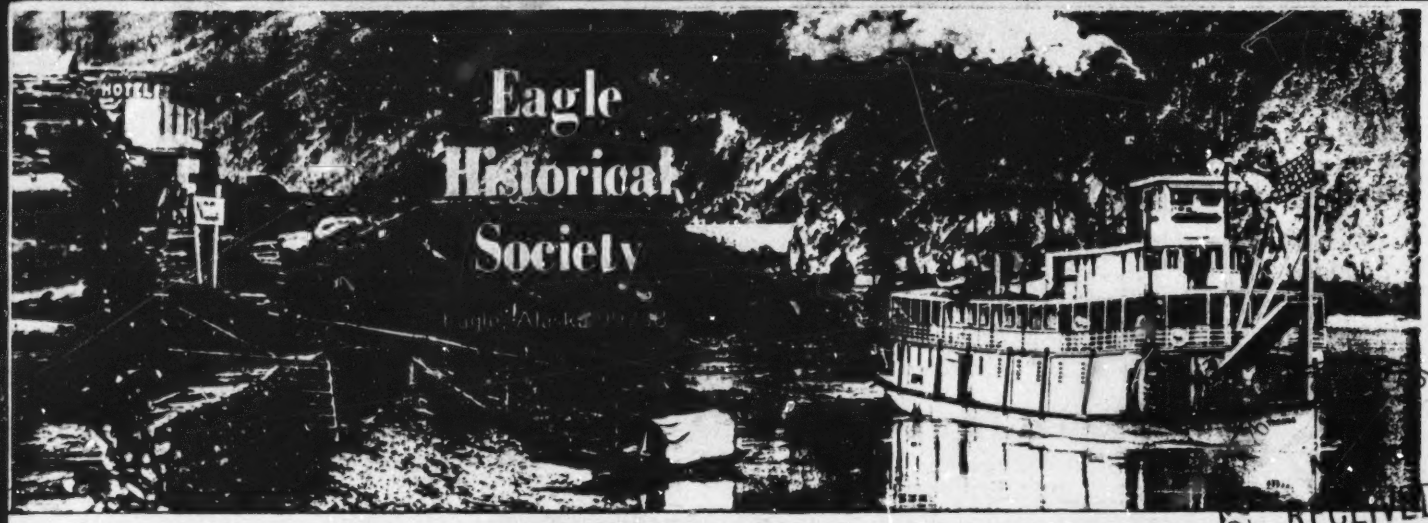

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HISTORIC EAGLE

Step into 1900 and imagine the streets of Eagle alive with prospectors, soldiers and hearty northern adventurers. Visit the Eagle museums, the historic church, the old Army mule barn, complete with name plates for each mule and see Judge Wickersham's first court house as it was in 1901.

These are only a few of the unique and historical attractions to see in Eagle City, a remnant of the past setting on the banks of the mighty Yukon River, overlooked by a stately bluff of geological interest. This little community, preserved much as it was in the early 1900's, offers the visitor a rare opportunity to glimpse into Alaska's past. It is located four air miles from the Canadian border.

Eagle was the focus of three distinct but interdependent communities that evolved side by side---Eagle Village, Eagle City and Fort Egbert. The oldest community, today called Eagle Village, was established by the Han Indians, a sub-group of the Athapaskans, and was known as Johnny's village originally. In 1880 Francois Mercier built a trading post near Johnny's Village which he called Belle Isle and used the post intermittently for several years. It was abandoned due to encroaching placers.

In 1898, 28 miners organized the permanent community and named it Eagle City for the bald Eagles that nested on the nearby bluff. Eagle's strategic location quickly brought it into focus as the military, judicial, communications and transportation headquarters for interior Alaska during the heyday of the Klondike gold rush. It provided a center for goods and services for prospectors and trappers in the surrounding bush areas.

In 1899 the Army established Fort Egbert adjacent to Eagle to maintain law and order, develop communication facilities on the frontier and build trails and roads. Between 1899 and 1908, thirty-seven military buildings were constructed including a 58 stall mule barn, gymnasium, icehouse, bakery and a 16 bed hospital. A unique water system was developed from a nearby spring. Some of these buildings still remain on their original sites.

In 1900 Judge Wickersham established the first Federal court in Alaska's interior at Eagle, making it the headquarters for the Third Judicial District which covered 300,000 square miles. His district contained no court-house, jail, school or other public building and not a mile of public wagon road or trail. In January 1901 President Theodore Roosevelt granted a city charter, making Eagle City the first incorporated city in the interior of Alaska. An independent school district was organized and school was started in September 1901, moving into their new school building in 1903.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Eagle became the communications center for all Alaska in October 1900 when the first telegraph link was completed from Fort Egbert to Dawson. In 1903 the telegraph line from Eagle to Valdez was completed, becoming part of the 1,497 mile WAMCATS (Washington-Alaska Cable and Telegraph System.) Lieutenant William "Billy" Mitchell, already a colorful character and later to become a leader in American aviation, was in charge of the construction of the Eagle half of the line to Valdez.

Roald Amundsen, the famous Norwegian polar explorer, arrived in Eagle, December 5, 1905, having mushed 1,000 miles from Hershel Island where his sloop, the GJOA was frozen in the Bering Sea. From Eagle he sent his news to the world of his discovery of the long sought NORTHWEST PASSAGE. Amundsen remained in Eagle for two months and then mushed back to the GJOA. Nine months later, they reached Nome, completing the first successful voyage from the Atlantic to the Pacific across the Arctic Ocean.

The winds of change began as early as 1904, when a shift of mining activities caused Judge Wickersham to move his court headquarters to Fairbanks. With the discovery of the wireless in 1908, the telegraph line became obsolete and work at Fort Egbert began to wind down. In 1911 Fort Egbert was abandoned except for a small Signal Corps detachment which remained to operate the wireless until 1925.

Moving with the infantry company, were many civilian employees and businesses dependent on the Army. 1912 brought a sudden drop in the population of Eagle. Even the school was closed temporarily due to a lack of students. Though this was a depressed period for the community, it gradually built an economy based on mining, freighting and trapping. Soon the school was opened and the church and social organizations resumed. The U.S. Commissioner held court and a U.S. Deputy Marshal was stationed in Eagle as well as a Game Warden. The Sternwheelers still plied the Yukon River and a roadhouse was maintained for travelers. According to the U.S. Census, there were 98 residents in 1920 and 54 in 1930 at Eagle with the population swelling during the winter months when many of the miners moved into town.

Mining was literally halted during World War II due to the draft, gas rationing and the need for the heavy mining equipment and its operators in war time projects. Eagle's population dwindled to nine following WW II, but grew to over a hundred after the Taylor Highway into Eagle was completed in the early 1950's.

In 1970 Eagle was named to the National Register of Historic Places. The five remaining buildings at Fort Egbert have been restored, as well as the original U.S. Court house and Custom's House museums. The headquarters for the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, which begins 12 miles downstream, is at Eagle. The Common Council of Eagle continues to hold their regular meetings in the original City Hall Building and church is held in the historic church building. The State of Alaska operates a public school for grades K-12. Many new buildings have been built since 1971, but most of them are log buildings which have not substantially changed the general appearance of the community. The well-house with its wind mill remains the main source of water for residents without private wells. The library, originally organized in 1901, is now housed in a fine new log building, which also contains the historic reading room. With the increase in the price of gold, a modern gold-rush has occurred. The creeks are full of recreational miners with their portable dredges, while the larger commercial outfits are reworking the old mining claims. The residents enjoy the rewards of their gardens, small farm animals, fishing, trapping, hunting, wood cutting, berry picking, dog mushing and mining.

Although the amenities of the 20th century, i.e. electricity, telephones, television and computers are catching up with Eagle, the city still retains much of the charm of the early 1900's. As a result, Eagle contains unique samples of the early gold rush and military era in a relatively undisturbed condition which visitors to the community can enjoy. With the state operated landing field, Eagle is now accessible by air, land and water.